‘Pedagogical learnings of Borat for make benefit glorious community of drama teachers’: What teachers can learn from *Borat* about frame, position and power when working in role

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Many would be surprised, and irritated, by the suggestion that any serious minded drama teacher could learn from anything the character of Borat, from the 2006 film of the same name (whose unwieldy full title *Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* has been paraphrased in the title of this paper). The images of Borat with his manic smile, his omnipresent polyester suit and, ‘that’ green g string, have infiltrated western culture to the point that many have become weary of them. Certainly, the world does not need any more Borat impersonations, and this paper is not an appeal for such. Indeed, if anything it is an appeal to teachers to avoid Borat’s tactics, particularly the use of what will be described here as ‘unsignalled role’ and ‘misframing’. The paper puts these tactics into a theoretical perspective, describes occasions when such tactics have been used in classrooms, and explores the important ethical, aesthetic and educational implications that arise.

The phenomenon of *Borat*:

Borat’s status as a cultural phenomenon is hard to deny. One would have to be entirely out of touch with American popular culture and media to not have heard something about the movie and the controversy surrounding it. In brief, *Borat* is a satirical ‘mockumentary’ or mock documentary involving the character of Borat Sagdiyev – a Kazackh TV presenter who, along with his equally unprepossessing producer Azamat (played by Ken Davitian), is sent by his government to the ‘US and

A' to make a film about that country's culture. Borat's adventures, including a road trip in pursuit of *Baywatch* star Pamela Anderson, provide a loose episodic structure for the film, while his encounters with various aspects of American life allow a savagely ironic commentary on the country's social, cultural and political identity.

As well as breaking box office records around the world, the film has been hugely controversial on a number of levels. Some (Gingery, 2006 White, 2006) have objected to the savagely ironic tone, which satirises America and exposes some of its most uncomfortable truths. Others (Edelstein, 2007) have balked at the content and images, which are pointedly and blatantly misogynist, racist, sadistic and, on occasion, just plain gross – as film reviewer Jim Slotek comments of one scene filmed in a hotel: 'Watch an angry Borat wrestle naked with his obese 'producer' Azamat ... then tell me you don't want that hairy image surgically removed from your brain.' (Slotek, 2006 n/p) Others have objected to the film-making process itself, with allegations that Romanian villagers employed as extras in the film, were never properly paid for their work and that their depiction was culturally insensitive (Pancevski & Ionescu, 2007). Much, then, has been written about the objectionable content and overall tone of *Borat*. However, this paper focuses on what is, I suggest, the main objection and the underpinning reason for all these other objections; the use 'unsignalled role' and 'misframing'.

Unsignalled role:

Unsignalled role might be defined as what happens where someone takes on a fictional role without making the semiotic 'signals' clear to others, thus leading to a mistaken belief that the role is a 'social' one – part of the ongoing social reality –

rather than part of some kind of drama or performance. Such unsignalled role is the staple of 'mockumentary' (or mock documentary) filmmaking of course[1], but the point of difference with *Borat* is that it appears in this case that not only the audience but also the other *actors* in the movie are taken in.[2]

Borat's victims are aware they are being filmed but they are not aware he is in role. They have agreed to be co-participants in an event but, crucially, they have not elected to be part of the transformed relationship that occurs when someone is in role (Aitken, 2007). Instead, they believe they really are being interviewed by someone from a foreign country and they struggle to behave appropriately. Occasionally (as on the New York subway), people are hostile but more often they make strained efforts at hospitality based on a confident assumption of their command of the situation, and their own cultural superiority within it. The comedy arises from the way the Borat character pushes further and further against the boundaries of this false relationship; manifesting increasingly outrageous behaviour until finally the relationship breaks down in some way. The more polite, superior or constrained his victims are, the further Borat is able to push. Perhaps the most extreme example occurs at a genteel dinner party in the South, where Borat's inappropriate behaviour escalates to the point of bringing his own excrement to the dining table (an act his hosts appear to deem more acceptable than his attempts to invite a black prostitute to the same table). This use of unsignalled role to subvert the theatre relationship and push boundaries has huge satirical potency, but also raises many important issues for drama educators to reflect on.

Unsignalled role, frame, position and power:

To provide a theoretical context for a discussion of unsignalled role and its effects on participants, we can return to the frame analysis of Victor Turner, Erving Goffman and others (Goffman, 1986; Turner, 1982). The notion of 'frame' is familiar to drama educators as a component of process drama planning where the teacher selects the 'frame' or 'way in' to a drama that provides participants with a particular viewpoint or perspective on the events as well as a degree of safe distance from events. As Bowell and Heap have defined it, 'frame is the element which, through its communication function, drives the roles and hence the drama and, through its distancing function, protects the participants into the experience of the drama.' (Bowell & Heap, 2002, p.78). This notion of frame, as something the teacher controls, is useful here but it is also worth returning to the sociological derivations of the concept, which are slightly different.

In his *Frame Analysis* (1986), Goffman suggests that human beings operate in social situations by selecting from a set of culturally defined 'frames' they have built up gradually from life experience. In any new situation, people search for an existing primary frame to 'fit' the particular situation and having chosen one, they adopt the behaviours, social positionings and power relationships they take to be associated with that frame. (Goffman, 1986, p.247) Or, if they cannot find an existing frame to fit, they adapt or construct a new one – a process Goffman calls 'reframing'. This is what we see the participants in *Borat* trying desperately to do as they struggle to behave appropriately within a situation they have not experienced before.

Goffman further suggests that in general people wish to demonstrate 'success' in their human interactions and thus will work very hard on getting framing 'right', tending to assume that any fracture is a misunderstanding on their part. (Goffman, 1986, p.309) The desire to frame things competently is associated with both social success and a desire to understand things as fully as possible. Borat's victims do not enjoy their sense of confusion and disempowerment and try as hard as possible to 'get a handle' on the situation. The same point could be made about the movie's audience members, who will frame the viewing experience differently depending on how much they know about the movie. Those who watch the film before reading publicity about it would have a very different experience from those who are already in on the 'joke'. Similarly, audience members initially offended at *Borat* may reframe their responses when they discover that the anti-Semitic Borat is played by British-born Sacha Baron Cohen who is from a Jewish background and studied a Masters degree in Jewish history at Cambridge University (Akbar, 2006). The knowledge that Baron Cohen is Jewish allows audience members to frame his character more 'successfully' and bring a different perspective on his intentions and the messages within the film. Whether this mitigates entirely against the sense of insult is, of course, a matter for individuals.

According to Goffman, framing takes on a particular quality where people are taking on conscious fictional roles, as in movies or the drama classroom. In these contexts, for one person to take on a fictional role and successfully sustain it they generally require others involved in the situation to frame the situation correctly, to take an appropriate position within the relationship, to agree on how to share power and control and to behave in ways that will sustain the frame and the role. In some theatre contexts this means asking some people to become 'audience members' and willingly

abdicate their power to speak and act to others who become ‘actors’ (Dallett, 1996; McKeogh, 1990). In children’s socio-dramatic play, or in the drama classroom the division of power may be more fluid (O’Toole 2002, pp.2-3). Indeed, the particular way participants agree to share power and behave will differ from occasion to occasion. Audiences at stand-up comedy will behave very differently from audiences at a pantomime. Moviegoers in one country will behave differently from those in another. Participants in a process drama will behave differently from those attending a serious Russian tragedy. Some aspects of participant behaviour may be consistent across genres, cultures and historical time but in many ways the specific conventions, paradigms and expectations of each situation will be uniquely different. What remains universal is the assumption that participants will look around for a way to frame the particular situation and work to sustain their understanding of that frame.

As part of this heightened consciousness of frame in role work, it is generally found that the presence of the frame, and the role is signalled more overtly. In some theatre buildings, the presence of the proscenium arch is a very literal signal of the ‘frame’ while in the movies, the frame is manifested in the presence of the screen and the fact that the performers are distanced in time and space from the audience and appear only as an image. In other forms of theatre, it may be harder to find a physical representation of the frame – perhaps it may be symbolised by a chalk line on a street or simply by a change in the way physical space is used. In classroom drama, the frame is usually signalled verbally (we’re doing drama now’) or symbolically through a use of props or costume items, or implicitly, through a change in the use of space, or the register of the teacher’s voice. These manifestations of frame assist participants to recognise what is happening, negotiate their position in the situation and behave

appropriately, or at least make decisions about whether and how they wish to take part. By eliminating these indications of frame, and indeed inducing deliberate misframing, the movie *Borat* deprives its participants of this possibility.

Accidental misframing & unsignalled role in theatre and classroom drama:

Misframing can happen in any context, either by accident or through someone's deliberate attempts to manufacture misunderstanding. Accidental misframings are quite a common event in our daily lives and can be said to occur whenever we misinterpret a situation. For example, when we mistake someone's gender, or misread the hand signals of another driver (Goffman, 1986, pp.302-3). If, has been argued earlier, the signifiers of frame are much more explicit in fictional contexts such as theatre, this would imply that accidental misframing is much less likely in these contexts. However, examples can be found: as occurred when I attended a performance by a New Zealand comedy singing group called 'Manic Opera' and sat beside an elderly woman in pearls who was under the mistaken impression she was going to receive something by Verdi or Wagner. In this instance, though there was a misframing, this was not deliberate on the part of the theatre makers. The audience member had simply misread the signals and mistaken the frame. She left at the interval.

Slightly more common, according to Goffman, are experiences where all the signals of the theatrical frame and role are clear and audience members frame the event correctly but then alter the quality of their response due to an unexpected emotional connection with what is happening within it. This example was reported in the *The San Fransisco News* in 1958:

> New York, March 12 – A young typist, apparently upset at a scene in the Broadway play, "Look Back in Anger," leaped across the footlights during last night's performance and attacked the leading man. Crying, "He left me, he left me," Joyce Geller, 25, began striking the British actor Kenneth Haigh, who portrays an adulterer in the play. "Why do you treat this girl this way?" She cried. (Cited in Goffman, 1986, p.363)

What appears to occur in situations like this, as Goffman suggests, is that the intense emotional charge of the material over-rides the importance of behaving according to the conventions of the situation, causing the audience member to momentarily 'break frame': The cause is an emotional or responsive surge that over-rides, or takes precedence over that person's sense of frame.

If this kind of accidental misframing, or emotional flooding out can occur in adults in situations where the frame of the drama is quite explicit, then the likelihood of such responses would seem to increase in the classroom drama situation, where frames are generally less explicit and where participants are children. For it has been suggested that children possess a highly developed capacity for retaining a dual awareness and equal belief in both the real and fictional words of a drama – a capacity Boal calls *metaxis* (Boal, 1995). Given this capacity, and the fact that signals in the drama classroom can sometimes be less explicit than in the theatre, occasional misframing would seem understandable. Indeed, teachers using role, even where this is made really explicit have reported that children will often 'check in' to confirm that someone is in role, even where that role would appear to be clearly fictional: 'you're not really the wolf's mum are you?' or 'are you really a spy chief as well as our teacher?' So, misframing or frame ambiguity can happen by accident or through the power of the imagination.

Deliberate misframing & unsignalled role:

Misframing can also be made to happen deliberately if the instigator of the drama deliberately sets it up so that others misunderstand the situation. Everyday examples of deliberate misframing are common. People are tricked into misframing an event every time someone takes them in with a fabrication and this is the basis of many a practical joke, from the very simple ('drink this, it's delicious') to the very complex (such as the common radio talk show prank where the host phones someone live on air and pretends to be someone they are not). It is this kind of 'practical joke' that Borat, or rather Cohen, is master of. And Cohen's work comes from a long tradition including in theatre. As Hern pointed out in the 1970s: 'surprising the audience and deceiving their expectations is one of the oldest (theatrical devices). Direct address is as old as the Greeks or medieval religious plays and as modern as Brecht. Making the audience part of the performance is as old as the Court Masques and as new as the Happening' (Hern, 1971 p.38). As early as 1614, Ben Jonson produced *Bartholmew Fair* (1614), which begins with a prologue designed to cause confusion as to whether the play has really begun:

> Enter Stage keeper
> Stage keeper: Gentlemen, have a little patience, they are e'en upon coming, instantly. He that should begin the play, Master Littlewit the Proctor, has a stitch new fallen in his black silk stocking; 'twill be drawn up ere you can tell twenty ... (*Bartholmew Fair,* p.307)

There is an important difference, however, between the way Jonson plays with the frame and what happens in *Borat*.

Partial misframing & unsignalled role:

Audience members on the receiving end of Johnson's prologue would be unlikely to misframe the whole event as reality, since they would have had sufficient other

indicators to frame the experience as a piece of theatre. Jonson did not mean to completely deceive audience members but rather to blur the 'edges' of the frame for comic effect. This might be called 'partial misframing' and similar experiments have continued throughout the western theatre tradition. For example, such experiments were the hallmark of Luigi Pirandello's work in the 1920s and 30s. His plays, such as *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921) and *Tonight we Improvise* (1932) included false starts, staged fights and mock breakdowns in performance all of which were designed to convince the audience that what was happening was part of their own social reality – or at least to make them wonder if it might be. There are some important distinctions between this kind of partial misframing and the tactics used by Borat. Audience members were caught out in a passive, rather than active way – they were never pushed to actively make fools of themselves. In addition, the misframing was not sustained for very long. Indeed, the force of the moment was dependent on the audience becoming aware of the fact that unsignalled role had been used. Unlike Borat's victims, these audience members were invited to reflect on the fact that they had misframed the events and why this was so, before then being offered another, more clearly signaled, relationship.

Sustained misframing & unsignalled role:

Given the explicit frames that usually operate in a theatre situation it would seem more difficult to manufacture a situation where audience members, or fellow actors misframe the entire experience as reality. However, if the performance takes place outside of a conventional setting it is possible to do so. Perhaps the most fully realised example of complete misframing in theatre terms is Boal's 'Invisible Theatre', which first emerged as part of the guerilla theatre of the 1960s and which can be seen as

having significant parallels with the tactics employed in Borat, though very different ends.[3] In Boal's work, actors would stage political arguments in restaurants, or on street corners, in the hope of drawing in onlookers to participate and engage with what was occurring. The aim, as Boal himself made clear was to make audience members misframe what was happening as reality:

> It is always very important that the actors do not reveal themselves to be actors! On this rests the *invisible* nature of this form of theatre. And it is precisely this invisible quality that will make the spectator act freely and fully, as if he were living a real situation – and after all, it is a real situation! (Boal 1979, p.147)

While Boal celebrated Invisible Theatre as a liberating and empowering experience for spectators, others have argued that the lack of audience awareness and consent makes Invisible Theatre disempowering and problematic (Kohtes, 1993; McKeogh, 1990; Aitken, 2007). Indeed, Kohtes goes so far as to argue that the lack of consent deprives audience members of aesthetic experience and thus cannot truly be defined as theatre. He states, 'it should, in fact, not be classified as political *theatre* but as political *action* with theatrical elements.' (Kohtes, 1993, p.87)

Deliberate misframing can happen in classroom drama too. Indeed, around the time that invisible theatre was first being practiced on the streets, many teachers began experimenting with something similar in classroom drama. As a young person, I recall participating in at least two such 'misframed' drama experiences – both when I was in the girl guides. On the first occasion, our group was taken by van to a house where we were told there had been a burglary. We were told to search for clues, take fingerprints and work out what had occurred. In the second experience, about a year later, I was leading a group of fellow guides on a forest hike. We rounded the corner to discover a man sitting on a log with a hatchet embedded in his leg. We were not

told at the time that this was a realistic wax model of a 'wound' – indeed we were made to think the injury and the blood were real. In both situations, I fully believed that what was happening was 'reality' and only came to realize these were fictional events when I read about invisible theatre some years later. Such practices were not uncommon in the 1970s and 1980s. In the same period, Dorothy Heathcote, the progenitor of process drama and the person credited with 'inventing' teacher in role, went through a phase of working with a strategy she called 'person in role' (Bolton, 2003, pp.100-105). In this phase of her work, Heathcote deviated from her previous emphasis on explicit signals and deliberately set out to make children misframe the drama as reality. In one example, students were invited to join her in the school hall where they encountered a huddled figure in rags who was introduced as a homeless person. Another time she allowed children to believe she was a disabled person, by arriving in a wheelchair and asking their help in redesigning her home (Bolton, 2003, p.133). Heathcote's experiments with 'person in role' were discontinued after a few attempts, largely because of how children responded. This will be discussed a little later in this paper.

The most sustained example of deliberate misframing or unsignalled role in a school context that I have encountered is *Holland New Town*. This was a one-and-a-half day long programme by the Bolton Octagon Theatre in Education Company (UK) in 1973 (see Schweitzer, 1983). During this programme, a group of eighteen students (sixteen year olds with educational challenges) were led to believe they were participating in a 'real' course in town planning. Five actors from the TIE group took on roles in an unsignalled way and the event was structured so that students were slowly exposed to a hidden tale of fraud and corruption in the town-planning department.

> The structure was repetitive; formal talk, followed by semi-formal group work, then informal tea-break and back to formal talk and so on ... it was even planned that they should be bored at times and deliberately distracted to overhear 'private' telephone calls and staffroom rows (Williams in Schweitzer, 1983, p.126)

The objectives here, as in Boal's work, were to rouse the children to political action:

> The sixteen year olds expect fairness and honesty from people in authority and they find themselves questioning technical expertise and local government infallibility and bureaucracy ... by the end of one and a half days and often sooner, they can remain passive no longer. (Williams in Schweitzer, 1983, p.126)

Like Boal, this company advocated using deliberate misframing as a means to spur participants to action and to emphasize the 'real life' import of the messages. However, like Heathcote, they were to encounter unforeseen issues with the students' responses. Again, these will be discussed later.

Misframing in the classroom:

As Heathcote, the TIE group and my girl-guide leaders discovered, it is relatively easy to deliberately misframe drama as reality when working with children, and perhaps easiest of all in a classroom context, or in a setting where there is ongoing and regular contact with children. Classroom teachers have a number of factors in their favour if they should choose to use deliberate misframing. First of all, the students are a captive audience. Unlike theatre makers, or street performers, teachers do not have to entice children to participate in a theatre experience. Neither do they have to entice children to stay – children are obligated to attend school and be present in the classroom. Perhaps more importantly, classroom teachers and their students are already operating within a complex power relationship based on a set of socially defined rules, conventions and understandings.[4] Because this pre-existing power

relationship is based on a *social* role (that of teacher) taking place in a *social* space (the classroom) it is only a small shift sideways to change into a *fictional* role and a *fictional* space and teachers may find it relatively easy to 'delude' students into a belief that no change has in fact occurred. The teacher also has certain practical and pragmatic things in her favour if he or she is determined to misframe an experience – children are accustomed to taking class trips, or having visitors from the 'real world' come in to the classroom. If they are told "this is a homeless man" or "we are visiting a crime scene" there is a reasonable chance they will believe it. So, if a teacher chooses to deliberately misframe an experience, there are many factors at play to assist in the attempt.

Quite apart from the deliberate use of misframing, some teachers may find they set up misframing quite inadvertently. For, unlike a theatre context, the teacher does not necessarily have to explicitly signal, "this is real" for children to misframe a fictional event as reality. The teacher needs only to *neglect* to signal "this is drama" and it is possible that children, or some children, will default to seeing what is occurring as part of their reality – at least the first time. I suggest that this is an important nuance for teachers of drama to understand and bear in mind. Even if a teacher does not deliberately seek to misframe a drama as reality, he or she must bear in mind that if the frame is not signalled, misframing is a possible, or in some cases, the probable outcome.

So, whether as a deliberate action, or an unwitting oversight, it is relatively easy to make misframing occur in a classroom context. It is easy to "do a Borat" on the children. The question is, do we want to? I am going to argue that there are real

problems with using deliberate misframing in any context - everyday life, theatre, movies or the classroom but that the practice is most particularly problematic in the classroom context.

Concerns with misframing:

The most immediate and obvious concern about the use of misframing is that, simply put, it is an act of deception. For theatre makers or moviemakers such as Cohen, this may or may not be a major concern. For teachers in New Zealand, charged as we are with a code of ethics, which includes in its four fundamental principles a duty of 'responsible care' and an expectation of 'truth: to be honest with others and self', we must ask ourselves whether we are comfortable with the idea of deceiving children (NZ Teacher's Council, 2008). With this in mind, the justification behind a performance like *Holland New Town* must be questionable. It is ironic that in their justification for the hidden corruption story within their performance, the company states: 'the sixteen year olds expect fairness and honesty from people in authority' (Williams, in Schweitzer, 1983, p.126). One must question whether they applied principles of 'fairness and honesty' from their own positions of authority over the children.

Secondly, though misframing can be relatively easy to instigate, it is difficult to sustain. The teacher, or visitor using deliberate misframing must stay 'in role' and committed to sustaining the illusion at all times. One of most striking features of the Borat phenomenon is the extent to which Cohen sustained his role both during the film making process – where he reportedly sustained his role off-camera in interactions with the director and crew – and also in interviews and publicity

appearances, where he continued to appear in role for over one year after the film (Strauss, 2006; Roudman, 2006). Teachers, while they might admire Cohen's impressive improvisation skills may find it difficult to emulate them. A third, and related concern is that the unsignalled role that characterizes misframing does not allow for the use of the out-of-role state. One of the strengths of teacher-in-role is that a teacher who signals the role can also slip *out* of role in front of the students to allow for interval, trips to the dentist, reminders to children to stay on task, negotiation with students and periods of reflection on the learnings being made. Recent research (Aitken, Fraser & Price, 2007) confirms the importance of the out-of-role state as a site for meta-cognitive reflection and learning for children involved in drama. This is not possible where unsignalled role is attempted.

A further concern with misframing is that children in a classroom, like audience members in a theatre may become suspicious and 'catch on' to the misframing – particularly if they are exposed to it a number of times. As the following quote from a disgruntled audience member shows, spectators exposed to misframing can learn to recognize it for what it is – to learn to 'frame it' in fact – at which point it loses its impact and becomes just another convention.

> The real thing, in the theatre, instantly becomes the wrong thing, the false thing … the moment a debater collars a member of the audience and hurls him up the aisle, you know – for certain now – that the man being manhandled is a plant. The management certainly isn't risking lawsuits by thrashing the living daylights out of genuine customers. The nearer the action comes to seeming an actual confrontation, the bigger and more transparent is the lie being told … theatre that abandons art for the actual, thus has an automatic cut-off valve built in to it, a moment when it turns into artifice, after all. Mightn't it, then, have been better as honest artifice – as art – to begin with? (Kier, in Goffman, 1986, p.420)

Teachers using deliberate misframing in the classroom may experience a similar

problem where their children 'see through' the artifice and challenge them on the nature of the event. Where this occurs, the focus of the participant is re-directed towards the business of framing rather than the internal 'business' or messages of the drama itself. Equally, the teacher may become consumed with the effort of sustaining the illusion rather than exploring the issues of the drama. In other words, both sides can develop a focus on working out the 'rules of the game' rather than playing the game itself. Where the original intention of misframing may have been to increase engagement and a sense of 'real' importance, the result can be the reverse – a sense of disengagement by both teachers and students.

Perhaps the greatest concern with the use of misframing, aside from ethical considerations, is that it could be said to deny the full potential and true nature of drama itself. As O'Toole says, 'the teacher who trusts the power of drama does not need to use deceit'. (O'Toole 2002, p.6) Theatre and drama are all about entering imagined worlds full of possibility. To assume that 'real' is somehow 'better' denies the power of the imagination. The danger, as Yan Martel puts it, is that we 'sacrifice our imaginations on the altar of crude reality' (Martel, 2001, p.ix). This is particularly unfortunate when working with children given the general acceptance of the importance of imagination in the intellectual and social development of children (Batt, 2001; Dockett & Fleer, 1999; Wood, 1988; Fein, 1979, Smith, 1998).

To diminish the place of the imagination in the drama classroom could also be said to deny the children possibilities for personal power that the imaginative realm brings. For many drama teachers, it is drama's potential for renegotiating power and status positions between teachers and children that is its greatest attraction:

> One of the key reasons I use drama is because when we create an imagined world we can imagine that we frame events differently so that our power and authority relationships are changed. A long-term aim of mine as a teacher is as much as possible to share power and authority with students. I want students to have opportunities to use words and deeds to act appropriately but in ways that are often not sanctioned in classrooms. (Edmiston, 2003, p.225)

Denial of the imagined status of drama, through misframing, effectively means that the teacher holds on to their power and no new relationships are negotiated.

As Edmiston implies, the decision to use misframing or unsignalled role can be seen as a political one. Often the imagined worlds of drama have more possibility than the everyday world, especially for children who are not the most enfranchised citizens of the 'real' world. As a girl guide faced with an unsignalled drama about a burglary and an injured man I framed it as reality and reacted as a child would: I stood around wondering why all these adults were not taking action and despite urgings from the adults around us, did not participate in the tasks. I recall being very surprised that the injured man did not seem upset. Similarly, at the 'burglary' scene, I became very passive – vaguely aware of a rule that one should not touch anything at a crime scene. Since no one around us was acting in an authentic way, all that happened for us as children was that the limitations of our realities were confirmed. We stayed firmly 'in role' as children. Had we been allowed to frame the situation as a drama – had we perhaps even been offered a role as 'detectives' or 'first aid experts' we would have known where we stood – and would have been exposed to many *more* possibilities than were open to us as children.

The lack of an explicit frame also eliminates possibilities for what has been called

'frame distance' where the teacher ensures a sense of distance between participants and the material being explored (Bowell & Heap, 2002). This can be particularly important in the case of sensitive or difficult material. If the experience is framed as reality, students experience it as such, with all the emotional impacts that implies. Although I do not recall being upset by the blood and gore in the forest, I do remember feeling quite scared at the burglary scene – afraid the burglar might return. Similarly, the young people involved in the *Holland New Town* drama become extremely caught up in the scandal to a point where emotions reached a 'potentially explosive situation'. (Williams in Schweitzer, 1983, p.126) The presence of the frame, and the ability to step away from the drama and look at what is happening objectively is key to maintaining safety.

The notion of 'safety' goes beyond emotional and physical safety, too. One of the advantages of operating in an imagined world is that one is liberated (at least to a degree) from real life consequences of one's decisions or actions. Bolton puts it this way:

> Tasks are and must be known to be fictional. At a visible concrete level they demand normal intellectual application from whoever is carrying out the task, but at a subsidiary level there is a 'no penalty' awareness felt by the doer, a sense of freeing the individual so they may find themselves caught off guard into identifying skills they did not know they had, into seeing some aspect of themselves in a different light, into revising the way they habitually think about themselves. (Bolton 2003, p.136)

This 'no penalty' aspect of drama is one of its most potent and exciting features. In *Holland New Town* students reportedly came close to taking the story to the media or the police. They were restrained, presumably, by a sense of reluctance to enter that real life 'penalty zone'. Had the experience been framed as a drama, they could have explored possible actions safely, within the fictional frame. To exclude the 'no

penalty zone', it could be argued, is to deny access to the place where drama has its most potential to promote personal transformation.

In addition to these ethical, developmental and political arguments against misframing, it is also possible to argue that failing to signal the drama denies the aesthetic / fictional character of a drama and thus the true nature of the drama 'idea'. Many theorists trying to define drama have placed primary value on *response* as the site of meaning, or the place where 'ideas' are actually formed. Here, for example Bundy writes about aesthetic engagement of children:

> I conclude that the IDEA is not contained in the drama but in the response of percipients as (or after) they experience it. It requires them to make some association between the drama and previous personal experience or understanding. The IDEA emerges in the association ... The IDEA of the work is a result of a juxtaposition of the matrices of perception, not a property of the work itself (Bundy 2003, p.178).

By denying participants the opportunity to perceive the drama as anything other than real life, the 'juxtaposition of matrices of perception' crucial to aesthetic engagement cannot occur. In that case, according to this response based view, true drama 'ideas' are not formed.

The long-term effects of misframing must also be considered here. Any student who has been deluded into misframing a drama is likely to be mistrustful in future, not only of the teacher but also of the medium of drama itself. Heathcote's biographer reports that 'person in role' did not always generate positive responses from children. In the example of the 'wheelchair' drama, after the students discovered Heathcote wasn't really a wheelchair user, children became angry and did not want to trust her or their class teachers again (Bolton, 2003, p.133). As for the students attending the

first performance of *Holland New Town*, Williams reports that they got very caught up in the fiction and absolutely believed in it. This left the actors with the 'unforeseen' problem of whether to explain the fiction, and risk hurt feelings and children feeling 'conned', or whether to follow the Invisible Theatre model and allow children to believe they had been part of something real. It is surprising to note that Williams describes this as 'an unforeseen problem' and it is questionable whether their response – which was to explain the nature of the fiction *after* the event – was an adequate solution (Williams, in Schweitzer, 1983, p.126).

This leads us another potential disadvantage of misframing - the fact that such tactics may jeopardize the learning. Williams notes a concern that students might feel 'conned' and 'dismiss the important learning experience together with their hurt feelings' (Williams, in Schweitzer, 1983, p.127). The other possibility, as in my own stories of the burglary and the adventure in the woods, is that children might feel so disempowered that they do not participate and do not meet any of the intended learning outcomes in the first place. In either case, teachers desiring to 'make learning better' by making it more 'real' run the risk of missing out altogether on that aim.

This paper opened with a question: what can teachers learn from Borat? I have tried to suggest that drama teachers can learn a great deal – mostly about how NOT to emulate his approach to misframing. Much of this paper has talked about historical examples of misframing and unsignalled role and it would be tempting to imagine that teachers now 'know better' and have moved on from this strategy. However, I wish to close the paper by suggesting that, in fact, the *Borat* phenomenon might be seen as an indicator of what might be ahead and that these historical examples of misframing in

the drama classroom might serve as lessons for us to learn from and avoid repeating.

An obsession with the 'real'?

It has been suggested that Western culture is currently experiencing something of an obsession with the 'real' or at least a 'privileging of the real' (Aitken, Fraser & Price, 2007) within popular culture, mass media and education. This is manifested in innumerable reality TV shows, as well as the popular affection for the hyper reality of video games and virtual environments, which, according to some commentators may be associated with 'a longing for a lost touch with reality' (Fetveit, 1999; see also Murray & Ouellette, 2004). At the same time, there is also an increased emphasis on 'the real' or 'authenticity' in education. Whilst the importance of 'real life' contexts, 'relevance' and 'authenticity' have played a central role in educational theories for some years (Ashton-Arner, 1963; Dewey, 1938; Beane, 1997) the notion of 'authenticity' is emerging as having new and particular relevance in modern education, particular in the contexts of science and technology education where new explorations are occurring with virtual technologies (see for example Herrington, 2000; Herrington, Oliver & Reeves, 2003; Shaffer & Resnick, 1999). Whilst in many ways we can welcome this, and certainly welcome the important work of researchers such as Carroll, Anderson and Cameron (Carroll, Anderson & Cameron, 2006) in articulating the bridges between drama in education in these contexts, there is perhaps also a cause for concern here. Is it possible that this attachment to the 'real' or 'hyper-real' in popular culture may combine with a pedagogical interest in the 'authentic' learning experience to result in an unfortunate resurgence of the use of misframing tactics of the sort described here? Is it possible, too, that growing international interest in, and awareness of drama as a pedagogical tool may act as a catalyst for this? I

would suggest so – especially where teachers have only a preliminary understanding of the subtleties of drama in education pedagogy.

I have heard a number of anecdotal accounts of teachers using misframing in their classrooms, both here in New Zealand and elsewhere – all with the very best of educational intentions. In one recent incident, a student told me how her teacher decided to enhance a social studies unit on police work. She 'staged' a robbery in her classroom, took statements from the children and held an identity parade without revealing that the 'robber' was actually her brother until the end of the term (per. com, anonymous intermediate school student, 2006). Meanwhile, according to a report in the New Zealand Herald, New Zealand police have adopted misframing as a tactic in their 'Right Track' Driver programme for teens with driving convictions. In addition to visiting police cells, meeting accident victims and looking at photographic evidence of what can happen to the body in a smash, the *Herald* describes how, as part of the programme, one group of young people and their parents were told they were to be taken to the Otara spinal unit.

> While out on the road they came across a serious accident. The car was smashed in and windows were broken. People were trapped and bleeding. Not realizing it was a mock accident, the teens and their parents ran to see if they could help. It was only then they were told it was not real and they were given information about what to do at an accident and how to help. (Binning, in *New Zealand Herald* Dec 29, 2007)

No doubt some would argue for the validity of such an approach when dealing with offenders, just as the creators of *Holland New Town* argued for the validity of their project with their particular learners. However, few would deny the importance of handling such experiments with great care, for all the reasons outlined in this paper. With examples such as these already occurring, it would appear that there is need for

greater awareness and fuller discussion of the potential issues of misframing. Such discussions need to happen amongst practicing teachers and at a preservice level.

As teachers, and teacher educators tapping in to the power of role and drama in 'authentic' learning environments we need to remain advocates for the true values and possibilities of role but we must also be spokespeople for the dangers of 'doing a Borat'. The issue of misframing is an issue of personal, ethical, aesthetic and professional boundaries. Let us note that Borat, the apparently ruthless pusher of boundaries does in fact respect a boundary when it comes to children. Apart from one slightly scared looking child in a passing car, the only children who appear in the movie do so as part of slightly incongruous 'set pieces' – in other words as consenting actors. Borat, it seems, puts a minimum age on his use of misframing. Does this suggest, then, that teachers who deliberately provoke students to misframe their drama are stooping to a level of guerilla tactics that even the makers of Borat would not countenance?

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ENDNOTES

[1] One New Zealand example of a mockdocumentary is the 1985 film *Forgotten Silver,* directed by Costa Botes and Peter Jackson. This film used 'a sophisticated blend of expositional, interactive and observational modes' (Hight & Roscoe, 2001-2007), to present a of a long-lost (and entirely fictional) New Zealand film-maker named Colin McKenzie. By portraying McKenzie as a hero figure, spelling out his rich and largely overlooked contribution to world film and making much of his capacity for creativity on a shoestring, the directors hooked into concepts that are central to the New Zealand psyche and some viewers seemed all-to-ready to accept them as truth even when the nature of the hoax was revealed the next day (Hight & Roscoe).

[2] Note that I am tentative here, since the exact details of who was complicit in the making of the movie are not clear. Pamela Anderson, for example, is listed as a co-star and she has claimed she was 'in on it all along' (Strauss, 2) but her scene with Borat (where he wrestles her to the floor in a traditional 'marriage sack') seems no less spontaneous and unstaged than the other confrontations in the movie.

[3] Though generally credited as being part of the guerilla movement, Boal himself was careful to distinguish his new form as something different from guerilla art (Boal, 1979, 147).

[4] I have argued elsewhere (Aitken 2006) that the teacher-student relationship bears many similarities to the relationship between theatre maker and audience member. Though the primary purpose of the relationships may be different, it can be useful to theorise how the two relationships may be sustained, and exploited in similar ways.